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# The study of the characteristics of successful english language teachers from the view point of the english language students of Islamic Azad University, Hamedan Branch

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## Abstract

A number of researchers have identified the characteristics of effective teachers both inside (Bernhardt & Hammadou, 1987; Lafayette, 1993; Mollica & Nuessel, 1996; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Schulz, 2000; Vélez-Rendón, 2002) and outside (Demmon-Berger, 1986; Lowman, 1996; Witcher et al., 2001; Koutsoulis, 2003) the domain of foreign language education. These characteristics consist of several underlying constructs including subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and socio/affective skills.

During the present paper, our goal was to study the characteristics of effective English teachers perceived by college students of Islamic Azad University, Hamedan branch in Iran. A number of 200 subjects randomly selected from among other 400 students were given a questionnaire of 50 questions on a 1 to 5 Likert Scale. Results show that students held different perceptions to effective teaching. The high achievement students reported different characteristics from the low achievement students in pedagogical knowledge and socio-affective skills, whereas the male students demonstrated different characteristics from the female students in socio-affective skills. The findings provide implications to knowledge-based teacher education for current and prospective English teachers.

*Keywords: English Language teacher, successful English language teacher*

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## 1. Introduction

English language teachers in play a fundamental role in their learners' learning and academic achievement. Effective and efficient learning on the part of the students highly depends on teachers and the actions they take in their classes (Markley, 2004). The way teachers behave and the methodologies they exploit in their teaching, to a large extent, depend on their perceptions of effective teaching and their beliefs about teacher efficacy (Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999). It also affects the way they understand and organize instruction (Chacón, 2005). Therefore, the teachers' perceptions of an effective teacher can highly influence their teaching and as a result their learners' learning (Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000). Students also bring their own beliefs about learning and their perceptions about effective teachers into classroom and their beliefs seem to have obvious relevance to their expectations of the course (Horwitz, 1988).

Some characteristics of effective teachers are universal, but others are domain-specific. Different groups such as teachers and students (Brosh, 1996; Lang et al., 1993), males and females (Witcher et al., 2001; Minor et al., 2002), good students and less-good students (Koutsoulis, 2003), and students with different majors (Check, 1986) held different views on effective teachers. These studies except Brosh's were conducted outside the domain of foreign

language education. Considering the uniqueness of foreign language education in terms of subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and socio/affective skills, the characteristics of effective foreign language teachers (EFLT) need to be investigated in-depth rather than merely applying what was found in general education to foreign language education. Investigating the characteristics of EFLT perceived by teachers and students is beneficial to teachers and students as well as researchers. On the part of teachers, they can check the appropriateness of their beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning based on current research and their colleagues' beliefs. In addition, teachers can understand what their students expect from them and develop their pedagogical techniques through reflection on teaching, which will in turn enhance the complex process of teaching and learning. For students, they can understand their teachers' beliefs and change their erroneous beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning. This study as a trailblazer of the research on effective teacher characteristics in Korea will sensitize to researchers to undertake new research avenues.

It is necessary to know the impressions of language learners about effective English language teachers from the view points of Iranian college students for many reasons. First of all, teachers' perceptions of efficacy plays an important role in their decision making in the classroom (Pintrich, 1990) as well as their professional practice and consequently affects the learning on the part of their students. Methodologies exploited by the teachers are reflection of how they conceptualize an effective teacher and their perceptions usually leads their actions in classroom in turn (Pajares, 1992). This issue becomes of great importance in Iranian context since language learning mainly takes place in formal language classroom (Kariminia & Salehizadeh, 2007). The second reason for undertaking such a study is to get informed about the perceptions of language learners about an effective English language teacher as their perceptions also can have an immense impact on their learning. Moreover, studies of this kind in contexts like Iran that the culture of teaching is primarily teacher-centred (Noora, 2008), in fact, serve as a needs analysis. It provides the learners with an opportunity to have their say and express their expectations of an effective teacher as well as helping the teachers to improve the quality of their teaching to meet their students' needs. In other words, in the process of teaching and learning getting informed about the opinions of learners will help teachers to better live up to their expectations (Babai Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009). After a brief review of the related literature, description of the procedures involved in conducting the study is presented. Then main findings of the study are discussed and key issues emerging from the present study and suggestions for continuing research into this topic conclude the paper.

In an attempt to investigate characteristics of outstanding university professors from the perspective of undergraduates students studying 24 different subjects, Smith, Medendorp, Ranck, Morrison and Kopfman (1994) found that general categories of ideal teachers' characteristics were conceptually important for the students. In their study general prototypical characteristics of outstanding professors were divided into three main groups of personal, interpersonal and class characteristics. Both males and females ranked class characteristics as highly important for ideal teachers. However, they differed significantly in ranking the two other general categories in salience. Females placed more importance on general interpersonal and behaviour category as well as specific category of being approachable more than male students. Males, on the other hand, valued general category of personal characteristics and particular attributes of being knowledgeable and having sense of humor more than females did.

### **Characteristics of Effective Foreign Language Teachers (EFLT)**

Compared with many studies done on the characteristics of effective teachers in general education, only a dearth of studies have been conducted to identify the characteristics of EFLT (Brosh, 1996; Molica & Nuessel, 1997). This is deplorable because foreign language education lags far behind general education in effective teachers and teacher education, and because foreign language education, to date, has been undertaken with more intuitive experiences than scientific inquiries. Brosh (1996) identified the characteristics of EFLT perceived by the high school teachers and students in Israel with interviews and a questionnaire consisting of 20 items of teacher characteristics. Both groups attributed the highest importance to items regarding commanding the target language and teaching comprehensibly, whereas neither the teachers nor the students endorsed items regarding positive attitudes toward native speakers and teaching in the target language. In addition, the teachers gave more weights than students on items about developing motivation and research orientation, whereas the students gave more weight than teachers on items about treating students fairly and making lessons interesting. To find the characteristics of the good language teacher, Molica and Nuessel (1997) studied good language learner behaviors with the hope that knowledge of the

good language learner traits can help the good language teacher create a classroom environment that will facilitate second language learning (Rubin, 1975). They outlined the traits of good language teachers as follows: Professional training such as professional meetings and instructional techniques; language proficiency such as four skills and cultural comprehension; instructional materials such as visual and audio materials; evaluation such as assessment of students and professional testing; and classroom environment such as reduction of second language anxiety and maintenance of classroom discipline. In the studies of foreign language teacher education, researchers have discussed effective teacher characteristics because the goal of teacher education is to produce quality teachers (Bernhardt & Hammadou, 1987; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Vélez-Rendón, 2002). The discussion has been centered on a teacher's knowledge base in terms of subject matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. Vélez-Rendón (2002) defined subject matter knowledge as what teachers know about what they teach and pedagogical knowledge as what teachers know about teaching their subjects. Put another way, subject matter knowledge in foreign language education refers to the target language proficiency in many cases, whereas pedagogical knowledge alludes to second/foreign language acquisition theories, teaching methods, and testing. Indeed, foreign language proficiency has been considered a crucial variable important to foreign language teaching (Buchmann, 1984; Lafayette, 1993; Schulz, 2000). Buchmann (1984) argued that teachers' command of foreign language made it possible to use the target language in class, personalize lessons according to students' backgrounds, and facilitate effective lesson planning. More specifically, Lafayette (1993) speculated that the recommended level of teachers' foreign language proficiency was advanced level as determined by the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. Deploring foreign language teacher education based on more opinions than research, Schulz (2000) indicated that the adequate linguistic proficiency required for effective foreign language teaching should be determined imminently. Foreign language proficiency cannot be transmitted to learners when teachers are not equipped with germane pedagogical knowledge (Shulman, 1986; Vélez-Rendón, 2002).

Shulman (1986) argued that pedagogical knowledge included ideas, concepts, analogies, explanations, and demonstrations used to make the subject matter comprehensible to students. Shulman's argument implies that foreign language learning theories and teaching methods are crucial domains of foreign language education. These

theories and methods should be studied in-depth and at the core of foreign language education programs for prospective and in-service teachers. Otherwise, native speakers and scholars in the related fields will ask for a pie of foreign language education with subject matter knowledge and wisdom of practice only. As was discussed in the general teacher education and in the studies by Brosh (1996) and Molica and Nuessel (1997), socio/affective skills are a crucial trait defining effective teacher characteristics. Indeed, the importance of these skills have been recognized in many areas in foreign language education such as research in foreign language acquisition theories (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996), motivation (Dörnyei, 1998), and learning strategies (Oxford, 1990), to name a few. Thus, even though socio/affective skills can be overlapped with pedagogical knowledge in a broad sense, these skills worth being discussed in an independent category rather than discussed under the category of pedagogical knowledge. In sum, the characteristics of EFLT consist of three different categories of knowledge: subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and socio-affective skills. These findings imply that the English teachers in Korea who demonstrate these dimensions of knowledge will be more effective teachers than those who don't. More specifically, Figure 1 illustrates the interdependent nature of the characteristics of EFLT. We mean by interdependent that effective teaching requires all the three categories of Knowledge.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Participants of this study were 200 male and female university students majoring in English language and literature in Islamic Azad University, Hamedan branch in Iran. English was the foreign language for all the subjects.

#### **3.2. Instrument**

A paper and pencil questionnaire was used for the purpose of data collection in this study. The questionnaire which was administered along with a covering letter was in English and Persian languages.

### 3.5. Findings

Subjects of the study had different ideas regarding the characteristics of an effective English language teacher. They agreed that usually successful language teachers follow syllabus tightly, stick to administrative rules and regulations and teaching techniques, are well-dressed, are knowledgeable, and are more sociable. They reported that female teachers are able to pronounce English better than male teachers. Responses of the male and female learners were significantly different. Most of the language learners also agreed that assigning homework, teaching English in English and alleviating students' anxiety in classes are characteristics that make an English language teacher effective. According to the data obtained, effective English language teachers provide learners with more opportunities to use English via meaningful tasks and activities and try to arouse the learners' motivation for learning English. Teaching English in English classes was another characteristic of an effective English teacher.

### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

There are universal teacher characteristics considered important, such as reading and speaking proficiency, arousing students' interest in learning English, and building students' self-confidence, and motivation. However, other characteristics are group-specific. For example, the teachers and the students placed more weights on listening proficiency and grammatical proficiency, respectively. The male students reported having a good sense of humor as important to teaching more than the female students did, whereas the female students reported pronunciation proficiency, teaching how to learn English, and treating students fairly as important teacher characteristics. The largest differences between the high and low achievement students were found in speaking proficiency and being helpful to students in and outside the classroom in favor of the high achievement students and in teaching tailored to students' proficiency levels and learning styles in favor of their counterparts. The importance of English teachers' proficiency cannot be overemphasized because teachers' high proficiency of a target language is necessary to accommodate students' proficiency levels and learning styles in class (Buchmann, 1984).

As findings of the present study indicate, male and female Iranian teachers and learners of English hold different views toward some characteristics of an effective English language teacher. Grammar translation method with strong emphasis on form-focused and translation activities is still pervasively used in Iranian English language teaching and learning context (Eslami 2010). Eslami found that Iranian English language learners find extensive use of translation activities as a shortcoming of language education system in Iran.

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